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Ky. Bunkhouse Becomes Recruiting Tool

By Charles Wolfe
Associated Press Writer
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MONROE, Ky. — The new cement block building on a shady patch of the sprawling Bale Farm hardly looks cutting-edge. Nor does its purpose — a bunkhouse for migrant workers — sound especially impressive.

But people who understand the labor intensity of large-scale tobacco farming, or who fret about humane treatment of migrant workers, see it as an innovation on both fronts.

Clean, spacious and well-equipped, the bunkhouse was first and foremost a business decision by Tommy Bale, a way to get a leg up in an unending competition for workers.

"I have to have a steady stream of labor in what I do," said Bale, who manages his family's 4,000-acre tobacco and cattle farm in western Kentucky. "If they're comfortable, they're going to do a good job working."

At the same time, Bale has set something of a social standard. When the farm held a ribbon-cutting for the bunkhouse, the visiting dignitaries from agriculture were rivaled in number by the religious and social workers who came to have a look.

"It takes an unusual farmer to take on something like this," said Sister Lorraine Lauter, an Ursuline nun who is working on a similar project in Daviess County. "This guy has clearly gone out way beyond what's required."

John Torres, a Southern Baptist missionary who works among the predominantly Hispanic migrant laborers of southern Kentucky, said the bunkhouse contrasted sharply with some workers' quarters he has seen elsewhere. "We can take a drive and I can show you places not fit for

living," Torres said.

Marta Roller said the bunkhouse was preferable to many of the apartments housing Hispanics in Lexington, where she works for the four-county Community Action Council.

"You have a safe place here," Roller said. "It's new. It's very complete. You're not going to get as much crime as you would living in a city."

Bale uses workers from Mexico under a federal program known throughout agriculture by its statutory designation, H-2A. It allows farmers who cannot obtain seasonal labor locally to import temporary workers.

The employer has to provide free housing. The employer also must provide three meals a day or furnish cooking and kitchen facilities.

The Bale Farm bunkhouse has not one kitchen but three. It has a bank of washers and dryers, toilets and individual showers. Two large bays have bunk beds and lockers for 32 men. The Bale family spent over \$100,000 on the building, according to agriculture and farm-labor officials.

"They didn't have to do this to be in compliance. They could have gotten along for a lot less money," said Jody Hughes, who oversees the H-2A program in the Kentucky Workforce Development Cabinet.

But Bale said he wanted a long-lasting building to help ensure a consistent work force. Bale Farm uses about 15 workers per year in its tobacco fields. They include a dozen workers who have returned every year for a decade. Bale said he works with the same labor contractor in Mexico.

Before H-2A, "labor just was getting so terrible that that was my No. 1 issue," he said. "You just couldn't find anybody who would do that work. It's progressively gotten worse, like it is with any labor-intensive thing."

Under H-2A rules, Bale is required to pay on a scale comparable to what locally hired workers would earn – \$7.07 per hour this year. He also has to provide worker's compensation insurance and furnish all tools and supplies.

Kentucky producers use about 4,000 H-2A workers per year, the fourth-highest total among the states, according to the Workforce Development Cabinet.

"For Kentucky farmers to be competitive in getting labor, they're going to have to provide housing such as this," said Hughes, the H-2A specialist. "Not every farmer can build a facility like this, but a

consortium of farmers can."

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